

457. Memorandum from Schlesinger to the President, October 29¹

October 29, 1962

- Post Mortem on Cuba

The basic point, it would seem to me, would be to set forth some general considerations about the value and limitations of force in foreign policy under the guise of a report to the nation on the rise and resolution of the Cuban crisis. The speech should interpret the nature of the victory in such a way as to accustom the nation to the future use of limited force for limited purposes while at the same time pointing out that our success in Cuba does not prove that force can solve everything. The speech might also deal with specific Cuban problems, emphasize our insistence on thoroughgoing verification of the armistice terms and justify the guarantee given to Castro.

I would suggest the following main points:

1. Our troubles are not at an end; but significant steps have been taken in the last 48 hours to lift the threat of war from the western hemisphere and the world. This has been made possible by the unity of the American people (including Republicans) behind a firm policy; by the unswerving support of our allies (especially by the OAS); by the framework for world discussion provided by the UN; and—it must be added—by the belated recognition of Chairman Khrushchev that his adventure was a dangerous miscalculation which was bringing the world close to war.
2. The concluding problems are yet to be worked out. We will continue our vigilance and surveillance until international bodies are prepared to take over these responsibilities. Every step in the resolution of this crisis will be rigorously verified. As for the guarantee against invasion, this step is fully consistent with our American traditions. The events of the last weeks have fully exposed Castro; and we are confident that the forces of change will take care of his regime more effectively than invasion ever could.
3. What do we learn from this experience? We learn first that firmness in defense of our vital interests is the central guarantee of security and peace. If we aren't prepared to be firm, we can expect neither security nor peace.
4. We learn, second, that the two extreme views on the proper role of force in international relations are wrong—the view which rejects force altogether as an instrument of foreign policy; and the view which supposes that force can solve everything.
5. If we had not reacted at all, we would have acquiesced in a drastic revision of the world balance of power. Our use of force was effective for several specific reasons—because our objectives were limited; because our force was precisely adjusted to these limited objectives; because Cuba does not lie within the range of Soviet vital interests or within the reach of Soviet conventional power; because the Communists knew that they

were in the wrong and could not sustain their action before the world (your law of equity); because, above all, the Soviet action represented a drastic threat to the delicate and precarious equilibrium of power in the world—the complex and accepted if never explicit agreement by which nations live and let live—which is the present foundation of our uneasy world peace.

The Soviet Union must expect any future interference with this world equilibrium of power to be met with an equally stern and united response.

6. Because force worked in this context does not mean that it will work in all contexts—that it will work if we on our part should seek to upset this precarious equilibrium—that it will work where the Soviet Union considers that its case is sound and that its vital interests are directly involved.

7. Our object is to use limited force to prevent the use of unlimited force. It is to confine the world contest to competition in the ways of peace—competition in advancing the welfare and freedom of ordinary men and women. In this competition, we can be confident of the superiority of democratic institutions and values.

8. The Cuban crisis, we hope, marked an end and a beginning—an end to violent adventures designed to overturn the equilibrium of world power; and a beginning of fresh initiatives for peace, including a new attack on nuclear testing, disarmament, overseas bases (?), and on world social and economic problems.

Arthur Schlesinger, jr.

1. Post mortem on Cuba. Confidential. 3 pp. Kennedy Library, NSF, Countries Series, Cuba, General, vol. IV(B).[e](#)

history@state.gov